

Distinguish between sense reference and denotation philosophy essay



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Individuals transfer their thoughts and ideas to each other via language. The speakers of a language have a common basic vocabulary, and share the knowledge of meaning of several words, in their mental lexicon. The meaning of an expression cannot be understood as the definitions found in a dictionary entry; consequently, linguists suggest alternative ways of defining meaning. K. Nelson (1985) proposed that meaning has three counterparts relating to: reference, denotation and sense.

A reference is the association between an expression and the object it refers to (the referent). Expressions referring to a particular object or entity in the world are described as referring expressions J. I Saeed (2003). Therefore, 'girl' is a referent in: 'That girl seems nice,' which is a referring expression.

Objects in the world

Reference, partly depends on the sense of expressions. Sense shows a relationship between the expression and the object in the world, in relation to a mental representation. J. I Saeed (2003) describes a mental representation as a complex and abstract element relating an idea to the object in the world (the concept). The relationship between sense, the expression and the referent was outlined by C. K. Ogden and I. A Richards when they presented the first semiotic triangle in: *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923). In the meaning triangle an expression is thought to provide access to an underlying concept, which in turn refers to an object in the world (referent). This clarifies the existence of a relationship between a word, a sense and its referent.

Denotes

A distinction between reference and sense is made in: On Sense and Reference, G. Frege (1892), revealing their close correlation whilst it is also suggesting that the sense of a sign may change without altering the referent. In order to describe how expressions referring to the same object may differ in sense, Frege presents the expressions 'morning star' and 'evening star'. Both refer to the same object regardless of their different senses. ("Morning star" = Venus at dawn whilst "Evening star" = Venus at dusk"). Frege describes the reference as the expression having an actual object corresponding to it and the sense of this expression as the concept of the expression.

An expression is said to expand its ability to denote because it is associated to an object, in the speaker's mind. Hence, reference and denotation are closely related. Referring is the action taken by the speaker in picking out objects in the world while denoting is a property possessed by the expression. A denotation is a constant relationship in a language which is independent of word use; it is not altered by time, unlike reference.

Two major theories also clarify the terms reference and denotation, both theories highlight the relationship between a linguistic expression and a referent. The Denotational Theory describes a direct relationship between expressions and objects. The Representational Theory, on the other hand, states that the relationship between the words and objects in the world is mediated by our mental model.

To conclude, language is seen as a means of recognizing objects in the world. Reference cannot be the sole idea of the theory of meaning but our

semantic knowledge suggests that sense, reference and denotation are vital for our understanding. Speakers of the same language understand each other because they share a basic vocabulary whilst also making sense of what a particular expression is denoting and referring to.

4. Outline the main features of Prototype Theory and show how it differs from the classical view of concepts as necessary and sufficient conditions. Give examples to support your answer.

Through the years, philosophers, scientists and linguists have thought about how language ties a word to a particular concept, whilst raising arguments about what makes a concept and what is the definition of meaning. One of the most remarkable theories presented in the 1970s was that of Eleanor Rosch and her colleagues.

This theory is based on the idea of prototypes, viewing concepts as constructed with the intention of creating a more typical member of a category, but eventually deviating into a less typical and hazier idea. For example in the colour concept; red is a more central representative, as opposed to fuchsia.

E. Rosch and her co-workers sustained their theory by analysing trends seen in the evidence they obtained during their experiments; speakers settled for the more typical members of a category of concepts. This demonstrates how categories are structured; some members of a concept may be more prototypical than others, lacking a certain sense of boundary. So, if speakers are asked for an example of fruit, they are expected to come up with more obvious examples, such as apples, rather than plums. This happens

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since the more outlined ideas, are the first that come to the speaker's mind, because the speaker is more 'used to' these ideas, and feels they are the 'safer' and more accurate.

Categories are mostly based upon the speaker's knowledge and experience of the real world. These categories are learned ideas, they are personal ideas ('personal construct') and so they are biased. As a result the lexicon (and conceptual categories) will differ according to the individual's social background and culture.

The Prototype Theory is sometimes described as a 'non-classical' theory because, may contrast the principles of the classical view. The classical theory suggested that an object could be correctly referred to by a word only if it has the correct 'qualifications' with regards to characteristics that signify the meaning of the expression or the word. For example, any type of bird is a 'bird' only if it has feathers, has wings, flies etc. If the 'bird' does not have wings, then the label 'bird' is inadequate and does not apply to the concept ♪ >bird ♪ ☰.

Central Concept

Considering, the concept ♪ >Cat ♪ ☰; the first idea that comes to a speaker's mind would be a small, meowing, four-legged, furry animal, with a tail.

Merging out into the fuzzier members of this category, would give not only big cats like leopards, lions and tigers, but also Sphinx (furless cats) and Manx (tail less cats). If the classical theory was applicable to this category, a Sphinx would never be considered a cat because it is furless, a Manx

wouldn't be considered a cat either because it has no tail, and even tigers,
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leopards and lions, they would be declined in the cat category for the reason that they do not meow, they roar.

In spite of the fact that the classical theory was taken for granted as correct for a long period of time, the breakthrough brought about by the works of E. Rosch brought linguists, philosophers and scientists alike to a understand the complexity of the meaning of a concept, and how it does not only depend on the entity it is tied to but also to the individual way by which it is perceived, a true milestone in cognitive language.

To what extent would you expect people who speak different languages to display fundamental differences in the way they think and perceive the world? Support your answer with examples from one particular domain, such as that of colour terms or number words.

The question of whether thought differs by culture, due to language differences in cultures has been puzzling philosophers for a long period of time. Does the representation in human thought involve a linguistic element or does it comprise mental images, independent of language? No stable conclusion has ever been taken regarding this situation but philosophers and linguists alike have aimed their studies and observations towards finding a clearer explanation.

The Universalist point of view suggests that thought is autonomous from language, whilst the Realist view suggests that language mirrors culture (relativism) and it influences the manner by which we think (determinism). The latter view suggests that cultural differences result in different ways of

thinking. Humbolt (19th century philosopher) implies that; languages project different perspectives on the world.

Two of the most prominent relativist theorists were Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. E. Sapir proposed that language made part of culture, and therefore is a factor that effects how a speaker thinks: " We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation." (Sapir, 1929). Whorf further suggested that culture not only ties itself to language but is also related to the way thought is created, paying attention to how grammar may create alternative lines of thought (Whorf, 1956).

Speakers of different languages are expected to think differently, this is not only due to their cultural differences but also due to their different language and linguistic abilities. By no means does a ' simpler' language make the speaker ' simple-minded', but not having words to describe a concept, may contrast that more complex language in terms of expressivity. For example, how can a person think that Christmas comes in December, without the words ' Christmas' and ' December' in his mental lexicon? The analysis for the further understanding of how language and thought relate can be done by analysing two speakers of different languages and comparing the way an object is perceived with regard to the vocabulary present within the language of each speaker.

Taking the core concept \uparrow >colour \uparrow \equiv and assuming that everyone has the same mental capacity to perceive concepts; if a language (L1) fails to provide a word for the colour yellow; language does indeed effect

perception, only if speakers of L1 will be unable to perceive the concept

† >yellow † ☰. Berlin and Kay (1969) studied this relation between thought, culture and language by tackling the core concept of colours; comparing languages whilst questioning whether there is a pattern for the understanding of core concepts to all cultures. For example: Dani (New Guinea) has two terms for describing colour, Tamil (India) has six terms for colour whilst Lebanese Arabic and English each have up to eleven terms. E. Rosch revised the Berlin and Kay theory by comparing speakers of Dani (having only a black/white system) and English speakers. Rosch studied whether speakers of Dani could still observe different colours and differentiate between them. Results of this study showed that regardless of their linguistic contrasts; Dani and English speakers showed the same trends in colour understanding helping Rosch to conclude that colour concepts are universal.

Language and thought may be related since certain concepts cannot be thought of unless the thinker or speaker has a language. Therefore, language and culture are seen to go hand in hand with thought.